

OUR LIBERTIES WE PRIZE:  
ERODING ACCESS AND ITS IMPACT ON VISUAL COVERAGE OF THE 2016  
PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNS

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ANALYSIS

I had just driven over three and a half hours on a mission to photograph a low-polling presidential candidate to find myself turned away at the door by the bureaucratic machinations and arbitrary rules of the famous Blue Bunny Ice Cream company.

After a week of photographing the high-polling political elite on stage, under bright lights, emotionally distant from their audience, I thought that rural Le Mars, Iowa, would be the perfect place to illustrate traditional campaigning, months ahead of the Iowa caucuses. But the Blue Bunny Ice Cream parlor has a rule against news organizations photographing in their building and it seemed in that moment everyone apparently had got the word of mouth memo that the presidential campaigns would be different this time.

A lack of access is one of the most prominent parts of the 2016 presidential campaigns season. On the surface, the nature of the top candidates' events alone speak most to an emphasis on stagecraft over accessibility to their supporters; bright lights and big venues were common at the earliest campaign events. With that has come an inability to clearly illustrate anything deeper about the person behind the podium, raising concerns over the power imbalance between presidential campaigns and the media. All eyes are on the candidates, and many photographers hope to reveal something about the candidate, but it's unclear what's being revealed when the campaign holds the power.

To a political outsider or establishment elite, leading up to the 2016 Iowa caucuses it almost seemed as if all the campaigns had read similar playbooks when trying to craft visual representations of their candidates.

The announcement speeches of the two party frontrunners were spectacles. Donald Trump, his stage situated in the opulent, golden lobby of Trump Tower, rode an escalator to the media scrum below. Hillary Clinton held her event, attended by thousands, on Roosevelt Island in New York City, with rows of media on risers and in chairs, the skyline of her adoptive home in the background.

The grandiose nature of these events could be dismissed as coincidence — as large events for a special moment in the beginning of a campaign. Large rallies historically happen during the general election, when the field has been narrowed to the presidential and vice presidential candidates on both sides. But, these first events seemingly set the tone for an election that would often focus visually on the trappings of the campaign than on the candidates as people.

For decades, Iowa has been the first state in the nation to voice its opinion on who should run for president (though in the form of a caucus, a process distinctly different than casting votes). Since the first Democratic caucuses in Iowa in 1972, candidates have taken advantage of the relatively low cost of campaigning in a small state to engage with a higher percentage of voters one-on-one while traveling fewer miles. Candidates try to seem down-to-earth, personable, and accessible to voters in a state where attack ads run counter to hard-to-define Midwestern values.

“If you look at last election cycle, people were still going to the small coffee shops and things like that all over the state,” said Aaron Bernstein, a freelance

photographer who for the last two Presidential elections has moved to Iowa to cover the campaigns. Bernstein works for a variety of clients, covering everything from the unrest in Ferguson in 2014 to the migrant crisis in Europe in 2015. He has spent much of his time working for Getty Images and Reuters in Iowa. As for the small, intimate campaign events in the 2016 campaign, “there was a limited amount of that going on this time,” he said, unlike in previous years.

In 2008, when then-senators Clinton and Obama faced off for the Democratic nomination, photographers made their most iconic images in these intimate spaces. Callie Shell’s documentary portraits of Obama waiting to take the stage, crouching in stairwells, feet up on a desk with holes worn through his shoes, his wife resting her head on his — these moments of quiet, away from stages, were as quintessential to Iowa campaigning as the photos of candidates eating corn dogs at the state fair. Similarly, in 2012 Brian Snyder of Reuters was able to capture behind the scenes moments with Mitt Romney’s campaign, even photographing Romney’s family playing Jenga in the greenroom before he conceded the race. The iconic imagery of past campaigns has focused on intimacy, access, and moments behind the scenes that seem to reveal something about the candidate as a person and not just a politician.

Four years removed from the last election cycle it’s as if the campaigns have hit the fast-forward button and skipped over the traditions of campaigning and the access that goes with it. Both Sen. Bernie Sanders and Trump draw large crowds, which have precipitated events with heavy-handed staging and orchestration. Clinton’s campaign, which has chosen smaller venues, still puts on polished events with a flag or campaign logo in nearly every possible background.

I've seen this personally, as a photographer who spent over three months in Iowa covering these caucuses, my first experience covering a Presidential campaign. While the first campaign stop I photographed had some of the traditional qualities I expected, the remaining events that day felt more in tune with a rock concert, Katy Perry's literal concert aside. Stops at coffee shops or restaurants, farms or supporters rural homes were nearly supplanted by large events and population centers. Only the lower-polling candidates, without the resources to do large events, stuck to the more traditional campaign tactics, tactics that never helped them rise to victory. It's almost as if campaigns ignored the precedent of primary season because they've found that there was little to be gained by nostalgia and plenty of success to controlling their own narrative as much as possible.

Access is essential to photojournalists and journalists alike who hope to say something salient and with depth of experience. While readership may be more concerned with a journalist's bias, perceptions of bias are often borne out by how facts are presented and on what journalists decide to report. In their research, academics Erving Goffman and Robert Entman independently came to the conclusion that how journalists contextualize complex subjects (in this case an election and all its issues) and decide their importance is largely reflective of their ability draw connections to other relevant issues through their own experiences. These personal experiences and history of reporting on a subject allow journalists to understand what is important and what is fluff, but almost entirely comes from an ability to fully collect their own observations that they can then come back to over time and reflect on. One event or observation, like Howard Dean's primal scream at a campaign stop in 2004 that translated poorly to a television

audience (and in the end some say doomed his campaign), on face value may say that a candidate is unstable or showing signs of the immense pressure of the campaign cycle. In reality, those who covered Dean knew he was a high-energy candidate who fed off the crowd and that his outburst, in person, didn't seem odd at all. Similarly Hillary Clinton has been accused of having a cold or fake personality and Bernie Sanders has been called angry and his ideas have been dismissed as extreme.

The earliest phases of the election often yield the most access, part of the reason I traveled to Iowa months ahead of the caucuses. With a large field of candidates on the Republican side, it seemed like there would be room for negotiating access that would allow me to do work that spoke to the candidates, their personal lives, and how their experiences impact who they are as politician. But from that first day, it was obvious that was a lot to hope for.

“What was happening this time was really just miniaturized versions of general elections where, even with [Sen. Marco] Rubio, every event he did was super crafted,” said Bernstein, who spent the last two weeks of the Iowa caucuses covering Rubio. “It was a lot more produced overall, and the candidates that were higher-level were doing things that were even more produced, like Trump and Bernie in particular are having events that are general-election-sized,” he said. “That makes it a lot less fun, but it is what it is.”

On the surface, Trump's campaign seems the most heavy-handed in its control of the media, at least on a physical level. Approximately 30 minutes before the start of each event, credentialed members of the media are forced into a penned-in area at the back of the room. I personally saw a reporter, who did not RSVP as media but attended as a part

of the general admission crowd, get picked out from the crowd by staff and brought into the pen, where the gate literally closed behind her. Once the event begins, photographers are not guaranteed any photos besides the head-on shot of Trump from a riser — if they can get a spot on the riser to begin with. Sometimes the campaign will take them into the buffer, the penned-in area separating the candidate from the crowd, or to the stage to photograph the candidate shaking hands with supporters on the rope line, but neither is a given. That means getting a unique photo at one of these events is a challenge from the start. It also restricts photographers' abilities to photograph the interaction with and reaction to the candidate. Similarly reporters cannot get the impressions of attendees when they're kept at a distance. All these complaints are putting aside the well-reported assault on Time magazine photographer Christopher Morris by a Secret Service agent at one of Trump's events.

“They [at the Trump campaign] don't mark spots on the riser for the individual outlets. You just have to be there so much earlier that it takes so much more time for a single Trump event than it normally would to cover these primary events,” Bernstein said. “You go on that riser, and you don't really need to stay on that riser for very long to get a long lens picture you need of him dead-on. Honestly, half the time you go up and you shoot those pictures, you go and you send those pictures while you're waiting to get taken to the buffer to be taken to the rope line.”

While limiting access may be inevitable with a candidate so inundated by the media, the candidate is only part of the story.

“The reality is the Trump phenomenon is as much about the people who are there to see him as it is about Trump,” Bernstein said. “They let you walk around before and

after the event, and you can make pictures around the fringes that are sort of allegorical or telling about everything that is going on around him. But you have to work much harder.”

Natalie Keyssar, a photographer working for Time magazine during this election cycle, agrees about the roll the supporters play in the story of the Trump phenomenon. Keyssar has spent much of her career working at the intersection of political activism and social unrest. That work has taken her to Venezuela, where she has also covered political issues.

“The only thing that’s real are the people, and that’s less controlled. Trump supporters are super, super colorful, and there’s sort of more excitement in photographing them,” Keyssar said. “The moments when I could get into the crowd before Trump arrived were pretty interesting, at least in terms of finding something and getting honest moments. Even if the rest of the time it was super, super controlled.”

While Trump’s campaign may be the most overt, it’s not alone in exerting control over the media.

“People who don’t spend a lot of time covering politics are very quick to criticize Trump and his campaign about access, and the thing that people don’t really take into account with that is that the access at the Trump rally is really not all that different than from Hillary Clinton,” Bernstein said. “All the mechanics are the same. You’re shooting from a riser, then you go to the buffer, then you shoot the rope line from the stage. When you net it all out it feels very equivalent at the end of the day. The vein of control is sort of bipartisan and fairly equivalent.”

Both Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sander's campaigns did allow some extra freedom of movement during events compared to Donald Trump's campaign. But the spaces photographers are allowed to move between have often been carefully prepared to create the best images, which means that the presence of the photographer and the photo they take has already been crafted to create the best impression of the candidate. A carefully placed flag, or a crowd of adoring supporters, any of these images forwards a narrative the candidate would be happy with, and while photographers are not looking for a *bad* picture, neither are they looking to make one that's being fed to them.

In turn, political photography this election cycle has focused more on the minutiae, the small moments that separate two otherwise similar pictures. And that work can get repetitive.

"It's very easy to make the sort of normal picture that you need to shoot for the wire or whoever it is you're working for," Bernstein echoed. "You sort of find ways to work with the light, to work with the crowd, that fits into whatever narrative of the story of the day is."

Working for a magazine client often means working within a longer narrative from the day to day events. But in working for Time magazine, Keyssar didn't find her job any less challenging.

"You shoot candidates on stages. You shoot weird geometric versions of candidates on stage. You play with light to make it different from just another picture of a candidate's face on stage. Then you shoot the crowd because that's the other thing you can shoot," Keyssar said. "So you're put in a fishbowl. The only options you have are to shoot the people cheering the candidate, and the candidate – well – candidate-ing."

“My pictures are really a lot about emotion, they always have been,” Keyssar said. “I start looking for off moments. I start looking for doubt, or for moments where something seems a little bit bizarre, a little bit strange, where the mask seems to be flipping on the circus itself. There's a moment of discord. Because, you know, a lot of what I think I'm feeling the sensation of documenting a show. I'm desperately, desperately looking, as we all are, for something real. But it feels harder than it should be, definitely.”

Absent uniqueness or depth, that repetition itself has become the narrative for both Bernstein and Keyssar, who focus on the incongruous moments that highlight the gap between reality and show that are ever-present in this election cycle.

“Starting out at the very beginning, separate from my day-to-day goals of doing the assignment work, I wanted to make the whole campaign a piece about how surreal this has all become and how disconnected from a greater reality it really is,” Bernstein said. “They're off-moments, and they're very much lost moments — not all things that would have a lot of day-to-day utility. I was extremely lucky in a sense that the way things are playing out this cycle lent itself to the concept I'm trying to work on.”

“I feel the body of work that I've created thus far for Time evokes something of the sense I feel of the disparity between the reality and show,” Keyssar said. “I think the way it's set up with only getting access to the candidate when they're on stage is, to me, the candidate becomes almost irrelevant to what I'm trying to say. I photograph the candidate because I have to, because it's my job, but what I find actually interesting as a photographer is the periphery, because that's the only thing that isn't controlled 100 percent. The crowds, the trappings, the sets — those things become where I search for

something to report on, something to show people, because photographing a candidate on stage is set up exactly the way their PR people want it, and that to me is just making a PR photo.”

That narrative about the show filled a void that otherwise would have been occupied by a traditional documentary approach.

“One of the basic ways that a photojournalist approaches a story about someone is to embed in their life and become a fly on the wall, and try not to be obnoxious and stay out of the way,” Keyssar said. “That’s how we profile musicians, that’s how we profile the rich, the poor, the in-between, the interesting, the boring.”

“Stuff that was a given eight years ago and, to an extent, four years ago, like being able to get on the bus with a candidate, being able to be in a candidate’s hotel room for a spray (a short opportunity to photograph with other outlets) while they watched the returns,” Bernstein said. “Now those are sort of like an ask that you may or may not get. It depends on your relationship with the campaign staff and how they feel about not just you, but who you are working for. And things that weren’t a huge deal, like being able to hang out backstage with Rubio before he comes out at an event, are now a much bigger deal. I certainly felt a lot more pressure to perform in those little gaps that we were given because we were given so few of them.”

On her first U.S. presidential campaign, Keyssar noticed the same absence of photos away from the podium.

“What I think doesn't happen, and what I think is really lacking, are opportunities to photograph the candidate when they're not on stage or walking from a bus to a building,” Keyssar said. “I had no particular expectation of getting a lot of that. But that it

seems that there's almost none of that — that every single moment is scripted makes me feel that I'm not sure that I'm able to do my job as a journalist because what I'm essentially documenting is a performance as opposed to the reality.

“Photographing Trump,” she mentioned, “all you get is the show. I’m pretty sure I’ve never seen that person.”

All the more reason to focus on a narrative framed with an eye toward stagecraft and unreality.

If there isn’t a playbook, there is at least a precedent for this level of control at these kinds of events.

“Even though you would never be able to get Trump or his people to admit this, it’s all an offshoot of Obama,” Bernstein said. “He has been extraordinarily restrictive with the media in general and especially photography. I think Hillary and Trump see that and say, ‘Well, there’s nothing to be gained by giving people more [access].’”

Members of the White House press corps and White House News Photographers Association have pushed back in recent years. In a November 2013 letter to Jay Carney, then the White House press secretary, the WHNPA, the National Press Photographers Association, The New York Times, The Associated Press, Agence France-Presse, Reuters, and others complained they didn’t have sufficient access to photograph Obama. A month before, editors at The Associated Press criticized the White House for offering official photos of pivotal moments of the presidency instead of allowing independent photographers to make their own images.

“As surely as if they were placing a hand over a journalist’s camera lens, officials in this administration are blocking the public from having an independent view of

important functions of the executive branch of government,” the letter said. “You are in effect replacing independent photojournalism with visual press releases.”

Not only are outlets having to push for access that in the past was given without much argument, it seems as though such arguments put journalists in difficult situations.

“I think there's a sort of bartering that happens. It does seem that the publications are in an impossible vice grip where they could be denied access or denied good access to candidates who they absolutely have to cover if they sort of fall out of their good graces,” Keyssar said. “Or that everybody is sort of trying to not ruffle any feathers of the campaigns, and the campaigns are sort of holding all the cards. If access is something that is meted out by the campaigns according to who they want to give it to and who can afford to get on the press plane, I think that raises really troubling questions for freedom of the press and accurate reporting on the campaign.”

After November, two months ahead of the caucuses, photographers and reporters with the Des Moines Register were barred from entry to Trump’s events because of what Trump called critical reporting critical reporting. So, the newspaper’s reporters and photographers went undercover, scaling down their normal gear and hoping they wouldn’t be caught. It’s a scary step in a world where even the most critical news outlets are tolerated by free and open governments in the west. While it would be extreme and quite the accusation to say that any news organization covering a campaign covers a candidate quid pro quo, acts like this are indicative of an environment where a candidate thinks “fair” is inherently counter to “critical”. Bemoaning restricted access means

bemoaning the potential loss of the ability to full undertake a journalistic effort to reveal the candidate, their personality, and their views without fear of retribution.

Bernstein noted, however, that news outlets had not been blameless in allowing the erosion of access.

In February 2016, People magazine ran a photo spread of Clinton on the campaign trail with her daughter, Chelsea.

“They just used official photos, essentially release photos, from the campaign,” Bernstein said. “There was a point in time where that really haven’t been done.”

Barbara Kinney, the staff photographer for the Clinton campaign and onetime Clinton White House photographer, took the photos.

“People decided the best way to get behind-the-scenes, intimate photos of the two was to let me shoot the story,” Kinney said in a Facebook post.

“Clearly ... People communicated to the campaign that they were interested in doing this story, and the campaign obviously was willing to furnish them with what they wanted,” Bernstein said. “It’s a non-threatening story. It’s the kind of story they’d want to push out, so of course they’re going to tell their official person to go shoot this. It makes sense.”

People magazine, for whatever justification they came up with, decided to undercut both the freelance photographic market but more importantly editorial independence, potentially setting a precedent of news organizations relying on content created by sympathetic employees that could continue in a potential Hillary Clinton White House.

“I think the people should be the story. The people are the story in any political situation, but, to me, I see very little interest because there’s no variety or reality,” Keyssar said. “In what other situation do photojournalists allow the subject to set themselves up, dress themselves ... and call it accurate photojournalism? We would never allow another subject to have that level of control. It’s interesting that we grant that control to the power brokers of our nation. Of course we have to because they have all the power.

“The more powerful people are, the less likely you are to get that [access], but I think there has been some major precedent of journalists getting that kind of access to politicians at some level in political races. If I had been given that kind of access to any of these candidates I would have done it happily.”

“I talk to a high-level communication person from one of the campaigns who is a veteran of many campaigns. He thought that stills have the potential to make iconic imagery that transcends what the video people do,” Bernstein said about his similar efforts to get deeper with a candidate. “And it can be storytelling, and in that sense he looks at it not as a collaborative process, but that everyone wins. It’s good for the campaign. It’s good for the outlets that are covering the campaign. But he’s definitely the exception.”

“I feel like everyone was sort of waiting for a moment when it would happen, and it just...” Keyssar trailed off. “I just thought it would happen, and my editors did, too. There’s no access — there’s just no access to any unguarded moments. Perhaps these people now live their whole lives, 24 hours a day, without unguarded moments, but I do

start to wonder as a journalist if what I'm doing is reporting or if what I'm doing is delivering the propaganda of each individual candidate to the populous.”

Keyssar, Bernstein and others have made a conscious decision to engage in a visual discussion of the election as a spectacle of the act of campaigning rather than in the orchestrated choreography that the politicians and their staffs have pushed.

“I can't help but compare everything to Venezuelan elections,” Keyssar said. “There's not a ton of access to the officials in the government that have power, but the media moves much more freely in Venezuela by comparison. There's less of a guarantee [of safety] there, but if you're not unlucky, then this country that we criticize so much for not being 'free,' it does look much more free and democratic than ours.”

With the intense restrictions on access we've seen potentially the loss of the old standard of iconic imagery. Photojournalism, just like politics and the electorate, is evolving to meet new challenges. The focus on the spectacle may become a part of the new iconic imagery when we look back on the campaign process. But it's important to remember what it's reflective of and the potential implications of losing a window into who the potential leaders of our country are beneath the surface.